

p kestaff

PLAIN
LANGUAGE
COMMISSION

Pikestaff 61
March 2013

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Lying in State: DVLA finally retracts its clear (but false) claims

For more than a year, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) has been telling motorists it will release their names and addresses to private-parking companies only after individually scrutinizing each request to see if it meets the 'reasonable cause' criteria. Its website pages said:

- 'We carefully evaluate every request for information and look to strike a balance between the individual's right to privacy and fair enforcement.'
- 'Each request is looked at individually to ensure that the privacy of motorists is properly safeguarded ...'

Yet these were lies because the DVLA, a State body, uses an electronic link to automatically release motorists' names and addresses to firms that are members of the British Parking Association (BPA). There's no individual scrutiny of the nearly two million electronic applications it receives. For providing this service to the firms, the DVLA collects £2.50 each time, amounting to about £5 million a year, which enables BPA members to chase motorists for about £160 million a year in non-official fines.

Having cajoled the DVLA for nearly a year to remove these false statements from its website, we're pleased to say the agency has done just that. Repeatedly asking nicely didn't work. But the first deceitful sentence disappeared within a day of us saying we'd go to the highest level of government if it was still there 10 days later. And when we pointed out that the second statement hadn't been removed and gave the DVLA a 24-hour deadline, the agency finally did the decent thing and withdrew it.

The new wording is less than transparent as it majors on the handful of paper-based applications for data, which the DVLA does look at individually, rather than the millions of electronic-link applications, which it doesn't.

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Accredited form improved by reader's complaint

Other campaigns of ours are lower-key and look at more minor points, but nonetheless improve the clarity of public documents.

For example, a reader wrote to us recently about a form he'd seen on a local government website; it bore our Clear English Standard but he thought various aspects of the form could be improved.

We investigated, and found that the form had been altered slightly since we accredited it. It's natural that organizations will sometimes need to change accredited documents; here's what our conditions say about this:

7 Alterations to accredited documents

When you wish to alter a document carrying the symbol, you must get our permission to continue using the symbol (unless the alterations are trivial). We will never unreasonably refuse permission. We will check the alterations and may suggest amendments. If less than half an hour's work is needed, we will not make a charge.

In this case, although the layout and a few other minor features had been altered, we still deemed it worthy of accreditation as it did meet the **criteria** published on our website. Overall, we believed the form would be well understood by the likely readers. It wasn't perfect but then few documents are – and we're pragmatists.

However, the reader had made a number of good points about possible improvements so we offered to send these (without his name) to the council concerned. The organization was pleased to receive these and incorporated most into a revised form, thanking us for forwarding the valuable user feedback. The reader responded: 'Well done for getting a response from [the council]. I think it's only right they are pulled up on these things as they use the law in many cases to enforce compliance.'

Of course, in an ideal world, we'd test all documents submitted for accreditation with real users, but – as Martin Cutts points out in his article '**Writing by numbers**' (see our website under 'Publications > Articles > Readability testing' this is rarely realistic:

Desirable though discussion groups may be, however, they are not practical for most of the small-scale writing and editing jobs we tackle. They cost too much to convene and they take too long to set up and run properly. Most of our customers want a 2–3 day turn-round on their editing jobs and they don't want a huge bill. Like most plain-language practitioners, we therefore apply our judgment and experience to the task of writing or editing, without using either discussion groups or readability tests ... It makes sense to convene discussion groups only when economy and time are not crucial factors.

So it's good to get feedback from real users of the documents we accredit. Seeing the Clear English Standard gives people a possible target for complaint – us – if they think a document's unclear. It may also persuade them to read more critically if it's been accredited.

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Clear English Standard: accredited documents on the web

The Clear English Standard appears on around 15,000 printed documents as well as some websites. It always gives us a thrill to see it being used on a new document, as well as to remember how widely it's been used from a standing start in 1994.

One of our customers, Children in Scotland, displays on its website several leaflets that carry the Clear English Standard. Meant to be read by children, their parents and their carers, the leaflets use lively text and illustrations to get the message across. Here's a link to one of them – [Getting ready to leave school](#).

For more information on our accreditation scheme – including our clear pricing structure, see – [Accreditation with the Clear English Standard](#).

'I could eat a horse'

Why was it so tricky to spot the horsemeat in the ready-meal lasagne? Because the cheese was mascarpone!



Frivolity aside (no more jokes about spaghetti bologneighs), never has the saying 'I could eat a horse' been more topical than in recent months, with the ongoing meat-adulteration scandal. But where does it come from? In his blog, etymologist Mark Forsyth

– aka the Inky Fool (and author of *The Etymologicon* and *The Horologicon*) – asks: 'Specifically, does it mean: 1) I am so hungry that I could eat something as large as a horse, an elephant or a blue whale, or 2) I am so hungry that I would be prepared to eat something unusual, like horse, squirrel or cockroach?'

It turns out that the phrase has been popular for years, but if you go back far enough (to the eighteenth century), it used to be 'I could eat a horse behind the saddle'.

Forsyth concludes:

I'm going to assume that [a horse] that is saddled is sweating, and that the bit behind it is the backside. Not even in France do they eat sweaty horse poo ... So I'm going to say that the phrase I could eat a horse refers not to the size of the horse, but to its unusualness; and that it's roughly the equivalent of the American I could eat the tail end of a skunk.

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Blog readers had various interesting insights to add, including the following:

It may also have something to do with the food of the Turanic horsemen that one millennium ago roamed the Eurasian steppes. They used to pack horse and other sorts of meat behind/under the saddle in order to get it tender and more palatable. In parts of Eastern Europe (and possibly in medieval times throughout most of the continent) the custom of eating meat preserved behind a saddle is still a slur directed toward Hungarians, who trace their ancestry among those wandering horse mounted nomads, warriors that emerged in Europe about eleven centuries ago terrorising the place from Russia to France.

'Mangerei un cavallo' ('I would eat a horse') is also a common saying in Italy, where ... eating horse isn't as uncommon as in English-speaking countries. So maybe this is one stroke against your theory?

Is it not a description of extreme hunger – hunger severe enough that you'd consider sacrificing something that you really need? When you have a horse you have personal transport, means of transporting goods, and means of cultivating your fields. Post repast, life would be much harder ...

In Yorkshire there is a phrase – 'I could eat a scabby horse between two buggy mattresses!' or in other words 'I could eat until I was rigwelled!'

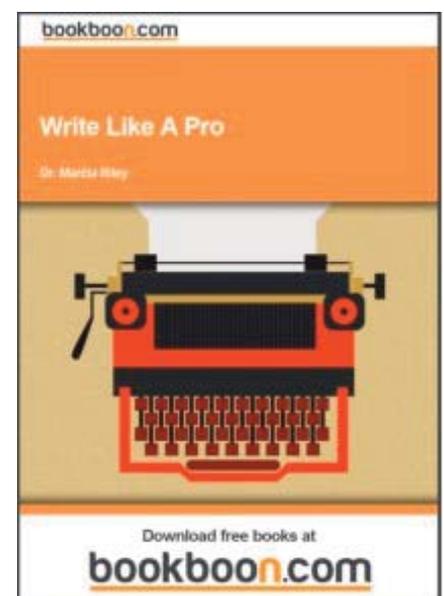
If you've any inspirations or inside knowledge on the origins of the saying, do write in and let us know.

Ironically, in Italy – where eating horse is usual – it's a rather expensive meat. Does their ready-meal horse cottage pie contain beef?

[Source: **The Inky Fool**, 20 February 2013]

Write Like A Pro

For 32 years, Dr Marcia Riley has been running a company that 'strives to help individuals strengthen their writing skills in American English'. *Write Like A Pro* is an e-book that aims to 'share the knowledge and empower others on the written word ... to give back to the Universe in a small way'. Available free of charge, it is published by London-based Bookboon, whose mission is 'that students should be able to go through university without having to pay for textbooks'. The books are financed with a low number of high-quality adverts – comprising no more than 15% of each book.



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In a feature for the Tennessee Tribune (where she used to be a columnist), Marcía explains more about the project:

Q *How did you come up with the title?*

A My personal philosophy is that everyone has the ability to be a prolific writer; it's just a matter of knowing their writing strengths and weaknesses, along with having access to effective writing tools and techniques. Of course, one has to have a sincere desire to want to improve their writing. Thus, *Write Like A Pro* just seemed like a practical title since once you use the knowledge you too can soar on the wings of words.

Q *What unique features will readers find in your book, if any?*

A *Write Like A Pro* not only presents effective manual tools and techniques to strengthen your writing skills, but also a variety of useful, free online resources.

Q *What is the most powerful or your favorite part of the book?*

A Well most authors would say that all parts of the book are favorites. However, two online editing tools that are my favorites: Find and Redefine; StyleWriter. These tools won't make you a better writer, just like Spell Check doesn't make you a better speller. Nonetheless, they help you produce clear, concise text while identifying unnecessary redundancy.

Download your free copy of *Write Like A Pro*. And *StyleWriter* is available through Plain Language Commission.



Use or utilize?

Continuing the discussion (see Pikestaff 60) on whether it's ever justifiable to use 'utilize' rather than the plainer 'use', Nick Wright (designer of the lauded StyleWriter) emailed: 'The real distinction of *utilize* is to describe the use of an object in a way that it was not designed for. So *utilizing* tights as a fan belt or a coat hanger to open a locked car door would be fine. All other times should be *use*.'

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Let's get quizzical

Easy peasy lemon squeezy?

From June this year, pupils in year 6 (the last year of primary school – so aged 10 and 11) will sit a national test in English grammar, punctuation and spelling. How would you fare? Find out by having a go at the Guardian's [14-question quiz](#). Let us know how you get on. Judging from comments on Twitter, we weren't the only ones who thought question 8 was a bit sneaky. Not child's play, that's for sure.

[Source: The Guardian, 3 February 2013]

A hairy question?

And here's our regular quiz question from language stalwart Ray Ward: 'What is the only English adjective whose spelling varies with the sex of the person described?'

As usual, you'll find the answer – and some related discussion – at the end. Can you think of any more adjectives of this type?

All rather silly mid-off

In one of his light-hearted website 'Jottings', Martin Cutts shares his glee that the current crop of promising England cricketers includes chaps by the rhyming names of Foakes, Stokes and Woakes (see – [Different strokes for different foakes](#)). Martin recalls the (apocryphal?) lines 'Lillee caught Willey bowled Dilley' and 'The batsman's Holding, the bowler's Willey'.

An obituary of sports writer Frank Keating – who died in January aged 75 – includes more cricket-related craic:

A verbal perfectionist, Keating disliked his prose being tinkered with. Yet he was amused by a misprint in a piece he'd written about C.B. Fry. The great cricketer was also a talented long jumper, whose party trick was to jump backwards onto a mantelpiece 'from a standing start'. To the author's dismay, this appeared in the newspaper as 'from a standing tart'. Keating complained, only to find that in the next [morning] edition, the word 'tart' had been changed to 'fart'.

Fnarr, fnarr, as Finbarr Saunders would say.

[Source: The Week, 9 February 2013]

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(Click on any item to view online)

10 March	'Any' is the weasel word of choice for apologies
10 March	Different Stokes for different Foakes
10 March	Duff punctuation marks the lovesick swain
10 March	DVLA retracts lie after Plain Language Commission campaign
10 March	Litotes outbreak in Kenya: not many dead
10 March	Memory key for cardinals, ordinals and nominals
10 March	Provos back in Belfast? Don't go there, Kia
10 February	BPA: 'We don't talk to consumers who think'
10 February	Bugs working as a team
10 February	Gay rites may lead to King Ron
10 February	Putting it plainly, the DVLA lies
10 February	Scots referendum question is clearer now

Conferences and events

In this slot, each month, we'll update you on future plain-language conferences and other events.

Clarity breakfast (22 April, London): 'The Visual Element in Complex Legal Documents'

Josiah Fisk (of More Carrot, a company that solves complex communication problems using plain language and information design) will illustrate, through a wealth of illustrations from the most turgid of documents, how communication can be improved and their appearance transformed.

For those who cannot attend the breakfast, a few tickets are available at up to £18 each for a slightly less law-focused presentation during the evening.

For more information, email daphne.perry@clarifynow.co.uk.

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PLAIN conference (10–13 October 2013, Vancouver, Canada)



The **homepage** of the site has been updated with links to:

- online registration – for the early-bird rate of \$375 (deadline 15 April), with a special rate for PLAIN members of \$350 (deadline 31 May)
- proposals – for submitting which the deadline has now gone; more soon on the programme
- sponsorship – for organizations who would like to join the league of sponsors to support this important global event
- exhibitors – how to expose your products and services to influential prospects at PLAIN2013.

Clarity conference



Like PLAIN, Clarity holds a conference every two years, with the two usually alternating. We'll let you know when there's an official announcement about Clarity's 2014 conference, which we've heard may be back in Europe this time.

Facebook

Pikestaff has its own page on Facebook, thanks to colleague James Fisher-Martins, who has kindly set this up for us and is posting regular features there. So visit facebook.com/PikestaffNews and have a look for yourself. What's not to 'like'?

Back issues

You can see back issues of Pikestaff on our website, as well as an index showing each month's content.

Tell a friend

If you think friends or colleagues would enjoy Pikestaff, please feel free to forward the newsletter (or any part of it) to them.

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Spread the word

We're happy for you to use any of our articles to promote plain language, provided you acknowledge Pikestaff as the source.

Rolling the credits

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Let's get quizzical: answer

Blond(e)

This is an interesting one, as some dictionaries (including Oxford) give the two forms of this adjective as interchangeable, regardless of sex. The Cambridge Guide to English Usage agrees, though says it's certainly conventional to use 'blonde' for women and 'blond' for men. It also says that some writers use 'blonde' as the noun (usually in reference to females only) and 'blond' as the adjective, giving the example (from the New York Times Book Review, 1983): 'British blondes with thanks to [whom] blond hair became a mark of feminine beauty'. Apparently there's theoretically a similar distinction between 'brunette' and 'brunet', though we've never seen it in practice.